

Not Said But Shown
(Philosophical Studies of Literature)

by

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Preface

The studies in this volume were written at different times over a period of more than thirty-five years. What unites almost all of them is the conviction that the literary works studied seek to *show* something philosophically interesting, *without saying it*. The reasons for this vary considerably in the different cases; and some attention to the reason for verbal silence or concealment is often necessary in order to make what is *shown* fully evident although it remains unsaid. The following short survey looks briefly at this problem, as well as explaining the actual occasions for the different essays.

The earliest of these studies was the essay on “Dante and Italian Philosophy.” It was written on the invitation of the Dante Society of Toronto, just a year or two after I moved from the United States to Canada — i.e. in 1963 or 1964. It is also different from the other studies, in that it only *states a thesis* about how Dante *shows* his philosophical position in the *Comedy*. A complete account of his position (which is far removed from the “philosophy” that is usually — and certainly not wrongly — ascribed to him) would require a full-length commentary. Also, the reasons for his “showing but not saying” are quite complex. When one realizes that the placing of the poet Virgil above the philosopher Aristotle, implies the conviction that the virtuous pagans (led by Virgil and Aristotle) are destined to be saved, one may think that the crucial reason for not *saying* this, was strictly prudential. But that would be a mistake, because — although Dante certainly did not want to give his enemies (especially the Pope) any new grounds for persecuting him, other than those they already had — what was morally important to him was the integrity of the faith. One should not *say* anything that disturbed the common faith — and one would *deserve* persecution if one did say anything “heretical.” It was fundamental to Dante’s philosophy of poetry, that a poetic vision could *show* things, that would only be apparent to those readers who had “eyes to see and ears to hear.” (I was myself quite oblivious about this dimension of Dante’s poetic silence in 1964.)

The next essay to arise — as far as I can remember now — was the study of *The Taming of the Shrew*. I wrote over half of this — and I had it *all* worked out — during the academic session of 1967/8. But the first germ of the idea came from seeing an amateur performance in Oxford, directed by Neville Coghill, in the summer of 1965. Coghill's note in the program directed my attention to Petruchio's promise to tame Katerina *like a hawk*. This meant, as I soon realized, that the taming was a *game*, in which Katerina had to play her part quite voluntarily. She was being *shown* a new way of life, and a better attitude toward the world with which she was at war. But also, the Induction was showing *us* the necessary boundaries of this new attitude.

It was an amateur dramatic performance that sparked my interest in the Oedipus story also (Glendon College, 1970s). I was initially struck by the confrontation of the *all*-seeing but inwardly blind Oedipus, with the blind, but inwardly all-seeing Teiresias. But when my interest led me to Philip Vellacott's *Sophocles and Oedipus* (19==), I began to see the play in quite a new light. As it seemed to me, Vellacott asked the questions that ought to be asked about what Sophokles makes the characters *say*. But Vellacott's *answers* to these questions were quite unacceptable; and much better ones were available if we would only attend to the basic loyalty of Oedipus to Apollo which is so clearly put before us on the stage. (I made two attempts to write my interpretation down during the 1970s. But they were only combined and completed after 1996.)

The first draft of the essay on *As You Like It* was written early in 1976. Again, it was sparked by an amateur performance. It was at first called "A Rose for Rosalind"; and the motives that led to my defense of the essential sanity of Shakespeare's heroine, were clearly set forth in it. We know that Rosalind is pretending; but unless we realize that Orlando (and the Duke) are as well aware of this as we are, we shall not see what we are being *shown* at all.

The study of *Middlemarch*, like that of form and content in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, was written at the end of the 1970s (or in the early 80s). I was using the novels as exemplars in courses on "The Philosophy of Art" and "Philosophy in Literature." These are normal and orthodox essays (I think) which demonstrate the insight that is produced by considering a novel as a "work of art." The concept of a "work of art" here is based on the Romantic ideal of "organic unity." The brevity of *Persuasion* made it very suitable for assignment in the "Philosophy of Art" class. In studying *Middlemarch* (as "Philosophy in Literature") we were looking for evidence of the influence of Feuerbach on George Eliot; but the claim of Henry

James that *Middlemarch* was a “baggy monster” set me the problem of showing just what kind of “organic unity” it really was. (I suspect that many students found it altogether too “baggy,” and did not read it properly at all. Eight hundred pages is just *too much* for a reading assignment! But that was certainly *their* loss.)

The “History of Abelard’s Misfortunes” and the resulting correspondence between Abelard and Heloise, belong properly to the history of philosophy; and I was led to study them when I was teaching a course on “Medieval Philosophy” (several times, in the late 1970s and early 80s, if I remember correctly). But I hope I have shown that both the treatise and the letters are *literary* works, in which much that is crucially important is not said, but implied. In this instance, the history of *what actually happened* between the lovers, can only be recovered, and rightly understood, when we have properly grasped the purposes (and the rhetorical strategies) of the writers. (I make no pretense to be a medieval expert, but I hope that I have set ordinary readers on some paths of fruitful meditation here. My own debts to some *real* experts — such as Etienne Gilson — will be evident enough.)

The essay on the *Antigone* was a by-product of my long struggle with Hegel’s *Phenomenology*. It was written at some time in the (late?) 1980s; and I was more concerned then with correcting Hegel’s errors (as I saw them), than with any revelation of what is shown, but not said in the play itself. All the same, this is a study of *what we do not see*, because of the assumptions that we bring from our own time-world (with Goethe as the first spokesman of our blinding certainties). In this respect, the *Antigone* essay resembles the Abelard essay, because we instinctively sympathize with (and largely misunderstand) the standpoints of both Heloise and Antigone.

The presence of Hegel in the “Hamlet” essay is much more incidental. He was simply a useful peg upon which to hang my “Machiavellian” reaction to the traditional reading (which seems again to have originated with Goethe). In this case, what we *think* we are being shown prevents us from attending as carefully as we ought to, to what is actually *said*. Hamlet explains himself quite clearly; but his “wounded name” persists (largely because we are all too familiar with the “revenge” theme before we start reading the play at all). This fruit of long meditation was finally written down in 1994.

The studies of how personal morality interacts with social ethics in Jane Austen, sprang from my indignant (indeed, quite *furious*) response to the libel against Mr. Darcy perpetrated by

A.G. Sulloway. I have read the novels many times over the years, and I was only too pleased to celebrate my official retirement from the academic career in 1996, by reading them again carefully. (I also thought that perhaps I could say something more interesting about the philosophy in them, than the “moral sense” approach of Gilbert Ryle produced.) This was in 1996; the twenty-year-old essay on *Persuasion* fell into place readily as an “ethical” study — though that was not how it was originally conceived. I hope it will be found that I have concentrated successfully on what is *not said* (this leads to some slightly surprising insights into Jane Austen’s own probable view of *Mansfield Park*).

Just a short time ago, I wrote the essay on “The Death of Heracles” (1999). I had been reflecting for a long time about trying to demonstrate that the apparent absence of the Furies in Sophokles’ *Electra* is a false appearance, because they are clearly *shown* to be quite active in Electra’s *mind*. She is haunted by the “Fury” of Agamemnon. But that essay would have involved the difficult task of a serious comparison with both Aeschylus and Euripides; and I found myself to be quite unequal to the required effort. Instead, I turned to the *Philoctetes* — and that led me back to the *Trachiniae*. I seem now to have discovered in Sophokles an ideal history of human cultural evolution, running from Heracles, who shows us the emergence of the *heroic* human from the beast, to Antigone — whose last speech marks the end of the heroic (or “royal”) age, and the dawn of communal human responsibility.

The essay on Othello, and the two Plato essays, are also products of a quite recent time. The conviction that Othello breaks down because of social insecurity caused by his “Moorish” self-awareness is one that I have nourished for many years; and I decided, in 1999, to see how far the text would support me, and what the picture would look like if “being a *Moor* in *Venice*” was precisely the “tragic flaw” in an outstandingly *heroic* character.

I have also been a devoted student of the *Symposium* for many years; and my sense of the marvellous organic unity of that dialogue has evolved gradually. In the main, the interpretation offered here comes from the last class of my teaching career (in 1995/6). My enormous enthusiasm went right over the heads of the luckless beginners who had to suffer it; but I hope it will be intelligible to any serious reader who is acquainted with the Divided Line and the Cave Story in the *Republic*.

I gave a talk on “The Unity of the *Phaedrus*” for a classical study-group at the University of Toronto in October 1969. The first pages of the present essay come directly from the outline

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that I made for that. But the main body of the essay is the result of a new study made in the year 2000. I do not think my interpretation has changed; but the reader will be able to decide for herself how far the first three pages are consistent with what follows.

I owe many debts that I cannot now remember. But I hope I may be forgiven, if the essays themselves are found to be enjoyable.

H.S.H.